

Message Text

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PAGE 01 BEIRUT 01397 01 OF 02 291258Z
ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 NEAE-00 SSO-00 NSCE-00 USIE-00
INRE-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07 L-03
NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 ACDA-07
IO-13 OMB-01 /071 W
-----291318Z 024149 /53

O R 291204Z MAR 77
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3478
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMEMBASSY TEHRAN
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BEIRUT 1397

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, MILI, LE
SUBJECT: SARKIS NAMES VICTOR KHOURGY NEW ARMY CHIEF

REF: (A) BEIRUT 1363, (B) BEIRUT 1371, (C) STATE 069130,
(D) DAMASCUS 2039

1. SUMMARY: COUNCIL OF MINISTERS MARCH 28 PROMOTED
COL. VICTOR KHOURY TO BRIGADIER AND MADE HIM COMMANDER
OF THE LEBANESE ARMY, REPLACING GENERAL HANNA SAID,
WHO IS EXPECTED TO LEAVE QUIETLY. "GENERAL STRIKE"
CALLED BY CHRISTIAN HARD-LINERS IS ENTERING ITS SECOND
DAY, BUT WITH ONLY PARTIAL SUCCESS AND WITHOUT
VIOLENCE. PHALANGE LEADER PIERRE GEMAYEL STRONGLY
ASSERTED HIS POLITICAL CONTROL OF THE PARTY AND
CRITICIZED THE ATTEMPTED STRIKE ACTION, PROBABLY
ADDING TO ALREADY SERIOUS INTERNAL LEBANESE FRONT
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PAGE 02 BEIRUT 01397 01 OF 02 291258Z

TENSIONS. DEFENSE MINISTER BOUTROS SAYS BOMB
ATTEMPT AGAINST HIM PRECEDING NIGHT WAS A SERIOUS
ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT. END SUMMARY.

2. VICTOR KHOURY NEW ARMY CHIEF. COUNCIL OF
MINISTERS MET MARCH 28, EARLIER THAN EXPECTED.
AT 1330 STATEMENT ANNOUNCED PROMULGATION, UNDER

EMERGENCY LEGISLATIVE POWERS, OF DECREE LAW NO. 25 BY WHICH COUNCIL OF MINISTER AUTHORIZED ITSELF TO NAME A COLONEL AS COMMANDER OF THE ARMY (AND CHIEF OF THE GENERAL STAFF) AND TO PROMOTE HIM TO THE RANK OF BRIGADIER GENERAL, REGARDLESS OF STANDING LEGISLATION GOVERNING PROMOTION. THE COUNCIL THEN ACCORDINGLY APPOINTED COL. VOCTOR KHOURY AS ARMY COMMANDER AND MADE HIM A BRIGADIER GENERAL. KHOURY, A CAREER OFFICER, MOST RECENTLY HAS BEEN COMMANDER OF THE NORTHERN REGION. HE IS SAID TO BE A TOUGH APPORTUNIST, AND CLOSE TO THE SYRIAN (REFTEL B).

3. HANNA SAID. DEFENSE MINISTER BOUTROS SAID FORMER ARMY CHIEF HANNA SAID MAY BE OFFERED A DIPLOMATIC POST ABROAD AND STRESSED THAT HIS REPLACEMENT "HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH HIS PERSON." ACCORDING TO YARZE SOURCES, SAID WILL ISSUE A FAREWELL STATEMENT MARCH 29, BUT THERE WILL BE NO FAREWELL CEREMONY.

4. HARD-LINERS PROTEST. THE GENERAL STRIKE MARCH 28 CALLED BY CHAMOUNISTS AND THE BECHIR GEMAYEL WING OF THE PHALANGE WAS ONLY PARTIALLY SUCCESSFUL. IT HAS APPARENTLY BEEN MOST EFFECTIVE IN THE AREAS OF FURN ES CHEBBAK, AIN EL REMMANEH, AND JUNIEH. DENIED ACCESS TO THE PRESS (WHICH IS ONLY REPORTING OPPOSITION TO PROTEST ACTION), THE HARD-LINERS ARE BEING FORCED TO RELY ENTIRELY ON THE CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 03 BEIRUT 01397 01 OF 02 291258Z

DISTRIBUTION OF TRACTS AND WORD-OF-MOUTH. WE HAVE A COPY OF A HANDBILL DISTRIBUTED EARLY MARCH 29 IN FURN ES CHEBBAK WHICH SAYS THAT THE NLP UNDER CHAMOUN'S CHAIRMANSHIP CALLED FOR THE GENERAL STRIKE AT A MEETING LATE MARCH 28. THE TRACT ALSO SAYS BECHIR GEMAYEL "DECLARED THAT THE DECISION OF THE NLP VOICED THE OPINION OF THE LEBANESE MAJORITY." IT SAYS THAT GEORGE ADWAN (TANZIM LEADER) HAS DECLARED THAT THE CHRISTIAN MILITARY "JOIN COMMAND" IN A MEETING MARCH 28 DECIDED TO PARTICIPATE IN "IMPLEMENTATION" OF THE STRIKE. THE TRACT HOWEVER CALLS FOR A "PEACEFUL STRIKE." ACCORDING TO SYMPATHETIC MILITARY SOURCES AT YARZE EARLY MARCH 29, THE STRIKE IS PERHAPS "80 PERCENT" SUCCESSFUL, BUT WE HAVE OTHER REPORTS OF A RETURN TO NORMALCY IN EAST BEIRUT. SCHOOLS IN EAST BEIRUT NEVERTHELESS CONTINUE CLOSED FOR THE SECOND DAY.

5. SHAYKH PIERRE LAYS DOWN THE LAW. PIERRE

GEMAYEL PRESIDED A MEETING OF THE PHALANGE PARTY POLITICAL BUREAU EARLY MARCH 28. THE PARTY ISSUED A STATEMENT DESCRIBING THE GENERAL STRIKE AS "NEGATIVE BEHAVIOR WHICH SHOULD BE REJECTED" AND RECALLING THAT THE POLITICAL BUREAU ITSELF WAS THE ONLY ORGAN OF THE PARTY AUTHORIZED TO MAKE POLITICAL DECISIONS. IT CALLED ON CITIZENS TO EXERCISE RESPONSIBILITY AND TO NOT SUCCUMB TO "ANY SUBVERSIVE EFFORT WHICH MIGHT RETARD THE BUILDING OF A NEW LEBANON." PIERRE GEMAYEL PERSONALLY CALLED FOR "MODERATION" AND A "POSITIVE ATTITUDE" FOR THE SAKE OF PUBLIC TRANQUILITY.

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PAGE 01 BEIRUT 01397 02 OF 02 291307Z
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NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 ACDA-07
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 BEIRUT 1397

6. LEBANESE FRONT TENSIONS. WE UNDERSTAND THAT THE CHAMOUN CAMP THOUGHT IT HAD A COMMITMENT FROM PIERRE GEMAYEL, PRIOR TO THE PHALANGE VISIT TO DAMASCUS MARCH 23-24, TO SUPPORT THEIR OPPOSITION TO THE REMOVAL OF HANNA SAID AT THIS TIME. APPARENTLY KARIM PAKRADOUNI BROUGHT BACK FROM DAMASCUS THE MESSAGE THAT THE SYRIANS WANTED THE CHANGE AT THIS TIME, AND PIERRE WENT ALONG. THIS WOULD EXPLAIN HOW CHAMOUN APPARENTLY OVERESTIMATED HIS OWN STRENGTH IN THE SITUATION.

7. ATTEMPTED ASSASSINATION OF BOUTROS. FOREIGN/
DEGENSE MINISTER BOUTROS SAID HE WOULD NOT MAKE
EASY ACCUSATIONS, BUT BELIEVES THE BOMB PLANTED
IN HIS APARTMENT HOUSE IN THE EARLY HOURS OF MARCH 28
(REFTEL A) WAS INTENDED TO KILL HIM AND NOT MERELY
AN ACT OF INTIMIDATION. THE EXPLOSION, ACCORDING TO
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PAGE 02 BEIRUT 01397 02 OF 02 291307Z

THE POLICE, WAS CAUSED BY A SEVEN KILOGRAM PLASTIC
CHARGE. PICTURES OF DAMAGE SHOW THAT UPPER FLOOR
OF TWO-FLOOR APARTMENT WAS REDUCED TO SHAMBLES.
HAD BOUTROS AND WIFE BEEN SLEEPING ON THAT FLOOR
THEY PROBABLY WOULD HAVE BEEN KILLED, OR SERIOUSLY
INJURED. HOWEVER, FORTUITOUSLY, BOUTROS FAMILY
SLEEPING QUARTERS WERE ON FLOOR BELOW RECEPTION
AREA, AT VARIANCE WITH LOCAL PATTERN. NUMEROUS
LEBANESE AND FOREIGN OFFICIALS EXPRESSED THEIR
OUTRAGE, INCLUDING MOSLEM LEADERS, THE LEADERSHIP
OF THE PSP AND THE FRENCH FOREIGN MINISTER. MESSAGE
FROM ACTING SECSTATE CHRISTOPHER (REFTEL C)
DELIVERED EARLY MARCH 29.

8. COMMENT: COL HAS TAKEN MOST DECISIVE AND
PERILOUS STEP SINCE SARKIS BECAME PRESIDENT, WITH
THE STRONG BACKING OF THE SYRIANS (REFTEL D) AND OF
THE POLITICAL--IF NOT MILITARY--LEADERSHIP OF THE
PHALANGE. EARLY INDICATIONS SUGGEST THAT IT WILL
WESTHER THIS FIRST SIGNIFICANT TEST OF STRENGTH WITH
THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT WING, THUS ENHANCING ITS OVERALL
DOMESTIC POSITION. IT REMAINS TO BE SEEN HOW WELL
AND HOW QUICKLY VICTOR KHOURY CAN BUILD A NEW
LEBANESE NATIONAL ARMY.
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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01-Jan-1994 12:00:00 am
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: POLITICAL STABILITY, MILITARY PERSONNEL, POLITICAL SITUATION, PERSONNEL APPOINTMENTS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Sent Date: 29-Mar-1977 12:00:00 am
Decaption Date: 01-Jan-1960 12:00:00 am
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1977BEIRUT01397
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D770107-0436
Format: TEL
From: BEIRUT
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1977/newtext/t19770313/aaaaaktm.tel
Line Count: 208
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: fd50a1b0-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 4
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: 77 BEIRUT 1363, 77 BEIRUT 1371, 77 STATE 69130, 77 DAMASCUS 2039
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 17-Mar-2005 12:00:00 am
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 2970282
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: SARKIS NAMES VICTOR KHOURGY NEW ARMY CHIEF
TAGS: PINT, MILI, LE, (KHOURGY, VICTOR)
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/fd50a1b0-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
22 May 2009
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009